

Acts 1:8 Sequentialism

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AS SHOCKING AS IT MAY SEEM

(at least it's shocking to me), many, many Christians are bored. They wonder at the wonderful and beautiful ways and yet, they are bored. How can this be? How can followers of Jesus who appear to be doing "all the right things" be bored?

I believe at least part of the problem is that they don't understand who they are. They know that they belong to Jesus, but they don't understand what that means. It's true that believers are meant to attend church, build good families and serve their communities. The problem is that, although they were made for all of those things, they were also made for MORE than those things.

One of the core identities of a follower of Jesus is to be a world changer. This can be seen from the earliest days of our father Abraham when he was told that all the nations on earth would be blessed through him (Gen. 12:3). When people begin to follow Jesus, they are then joined into this family of Abraham (Gal. 3:7-9, 14). This dream of all the nations of the earth being blessed is the foundation of our faith and also the ultimate culmination of our faith (cf. Rev. 5:9). The glory of the nations of the earth is a key building block of God's own city (Rev. 21:24-26). From these passages, it seems that ALL believers are made to be a part of God's global purposes.

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Acts 1:8 helps spell out the scope of God's global glory. For many, a misunderstanding of this passage has led to a misunderstanding of who they are. In Acts 1:8 Jesus tells us that we will need the power of the Holy Spirit to be able to be witnesses of the Good News of Jesus. Then Jesus says that the gospel will go to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth as His people serve as witnesses. Some have taken this verse to mean that the gospel will progressively move from Jerusalem then Judea and Samaria and then the ends of the earth. Although the

conjunction in this verse is far more often interpreted as "and" than "then" in the Bible, grammatical arguments are not the strongest ones to look at.

The strongest argument that this verse was NEVER understood by the early Church as being sequential is the behavior of the early Church itself. If the early Church had taken this verse to mean that they would FIRST reach Jerusalem and then move on, then the Church would likely still be in Jerusalem today. It doesn't take much of a walk around modern day Jerusalem to realize that there are many people there who are not following Jesus to this day. And, yet the early Church did finally send out a missionary team in Acts 13. There is no reason to believe that either Jerusalem or Antioch had 100% followers of Jesus at the time that the early Church sent Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey.

So, how did they know when to send out their first missionary teams? When the Holy Spirit told them to do so. They prayed, He spoke, they obeyed. It would have been ridiculous to argue with the Holy Spirit that Antioch had not yet been reached and therefore they could not move on to another place.

So, how is it that many believers today say, "We have so many lost here. We can't move on until we reach all the people here." It seems to me that this statement is a fundamental misunderstanding of two things: how the kingdom grows (or doesn't) and of who we are as children of Abraham and receivers of the Holy Spirit and His gifts.

Jesus taught in the parable of the sower of the seed (Matt. 3:1-23, 18-23, Mark 4:1-20, Luke 8:4-15) that only one of four kinds of soil bore any long-lasting fruit at all. This oft quoted idea that "there are still many people here that have not been saved and so we should not move on" is the same as staying to till the poor soil. People who have heard but have not responded positively are poor soil. We are still called to love them, but the parable also calls us to move on to other soil. Jesus never implies that believers should stay and till poor soil. In fact, it seems to be a truth of the operation of the kingdom that not all will respond to the sowing of the gospel seed.

It seems that there is a deeper theological issue with saying that a particular local church is called to ONLY local work. The rub is in the different gifts given to the local church. Often churches are led by someone who is a shepherd as listed in Ephesians 4. Shepherds are called to tend the flock and are usually called to a primarily local ministry. However, all of the ministries in Ephesians 4 are called to equip the saints for works of service (cf. Eph. 4:12).

To say that a particular local body has no global calling is to decide that NO ONE in that church will ever be called as an apostle. This is surely not what any local shepherd would want to imply. Local pastors understand that it is their job to “fan into flames” the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given to the members of the congregation (cf. 2 Tim. 1:6). No one should condemn some gifts as not welcome within their church. To do so is poor shepherding and crushing to the hearts of those who are given an apostolic gift from Holy Spirit.

For example, I have friends that are the first believers in a people group that has .01% believers. But when they prayed, they felt strongly that Jesus asked them to go to another people group that was not their own. Logically, it might not make sense. But it's God who gifted them for global purposes and sent them out. They simply obeyed. Their own Jerusalem has almost no believers in it at all and yet they moved to “the ends of the earth” where there are also almost no believers. How did they know it was time for them to go? The same way they knew in Acts 13: the body prayed, the Holy Spirit spoke, and so they obeyed. To hold them to their own Jerusalem might have seemed logical but I am convinced that it would not have been obedience to Jesus.

I do not mean to imply that being involved in God's global glory is only for those with an apostolic gifting. For some, they will be involved by sending as the Scriptures say, “How can they go unless they are sent?” (Rom. 10:15) Declaring that a local body will only reach locally denies the calling on both Goers and Senders. Often what happens is that men and women with such a gift on their lives are in an environment that does not shepherd them in that global calling and leaves them feeling a lot of angst.

Globally called believers will feel torn as they try to be obedient to their local shepherd who only believes in local ministry because they are not doing what they were gifted to do. And, so they serve in many, many ways but they begin to slowly die inside and wonder what they are missing. In addition, they are often told that they do not properly understand Acts 1:8 which only makes them feel

worse. They wonder why they can't just settle down and do local outreach like everyone else. It's obvious that local outreach is important and something their church (like all churches) is called to do. Calling everything missions can actually destroy the uniqueness of the apostolic calling. Often such people feel torn between the Spirit in them and their local shepherd they long to obey.

As a part of this global family of God, we have joy when we are connected globally. Local bodies that are praying for those who do not know Jesus, giving finances, personnel and resources to the other side of the world and establishing friendships globally do not die and do not lack local outreach. Quite the contrary.

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If a local church is not reaching out locally, denying global outreach is not the way to get people to reach locally. In fact, beginning to call people to global purposes and awakening them to the purpose of the family of Abraham will also awaken people to local outreach. For the restoration of the global purpose is a repairing of the heart, even a healing of the soul of something that has been robbed of them. Not all of our local church members will be goers (missionaries) but all will use their gifts in one way or another for God's global purposes and glory. Some will use their gifts of helps, intercession, babysitting, carpentry, etc. to achieve God's aims on a global level. Some will go. Some will serve more locally while others serve almost exclusively globally.

Let's not tell our congregants that they are too insignificant and too unimportant to be connected to the global body. This is not the message of Jesus. Every congregation, no matter how lost the world outside its own doors, is made for both local and global impact. Denying one or the other is a denial of who the family of Abraham was made to be.

A people awakened to their identity in Christ will be awakened to this global identity and global belonging. To then limit their sphere of influence locally is simply not good shepherding or kingdom building. Let's call the local church to its global purpose. Let's call it to live again, to have significance, to live for more than itself, to transform communities and neighborhoods and to transform the whole world for Jesus. 